ON THE ETHNONYMES IN THE THAI
LINGUISTIC FAMILY IN VIETNAM

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1. An ethnonym can have different origins: calling name or called one. When determining
ethic compositions, researchers base their determination on scientific data in order to give an
appellation that can coincide incompletely with the calling name or called one.

For the ethnies belonging to the Thai linguistic family in Vietnam, the ethnonymes of Tay, Nung,
Thai, Tho are not strange. However, a foreign scholar once asked me seriously "You are Tay-Nung
people not Tay-Thai, aren't you?".

After hearing my explanation, she advised me to distinguish Tai, Tay, Nung, Tho when I have
the chance, in comparing with the way of writing in foreign paper in order to avoid mistakes when
researching, reading referent books in English and French facing tai, tay, thai, tho...

That seems simple but to "speak with evidence" for the the way writing is used by these
scholars, we have to spend more time researching carefully... as citing follow although they are
insufficient, I would like to give the following citations.

2. At first, it's necessary to distinguish the ethnonyme of Thai as referring to the Thai in
particular from the usage of Thai linguistic family in general.

For the name of Thai referring to the Thai ethnic group, in English and French documents, we
face: Thai or thai, tay or tai ¹. (note h-silent in French).

The name of Thai is used to indicate the ethnic groups belonging to Thai linguistic family in
general among which Tay is the most crowded and more exactly, it is clearly called as Tay-Thai
linguistic family, Tay-Thai linguistic group. For example:

- Displaying room... describes the environment, cultural scene and the lifestyle of 8 ethnies under
Tay-Thai linguistic group (Hong Thanh - Open the displaying room for the culture of Tay-Thai

Used this meaning, the scientific content of the Vietnam Programme of Thai Studies (founded
from 7 September 1989 under Centre for Vietnamese and Intercultural Studies, Hanoi National
University), not only involved in the Thai exactly but also the involved object of this Programme is
the other 7 nations in the same linguistic family, they are: Tay, Nung, Giay, Lao, Lu, Cao Lan - San Chay,
Bo Y.

¹ BENEDICT, P.K.- Austro-Thai and Austroasiatic AS. 1976, pp. 1-36
BONIFACY, A.- étude sur les Tay de la Rivière Claire au Tonkin et dans la Chine méridionale (Yunnan et
Konangsi) TP sér. 2, 8. 1907, pp. 77-98. [Bằng tư: Giay (Dioi), Nùng An, Nùng Chuong, Thọ blanc, Thọ noir,
Trưng châ (Cao Lan)... MARTINI, F.- Romanisation des parlers tay du Nord Vietnam. BEFEO 46, 1954,
pp.555-572.
HAUDRICOURT, A.G.- étude des mots signifiant "œil" et "mourir" dans les langues de la famille.

Unpublished manuscripts on Tai languages at EFEPO: Black Tai of Maida; Black Tai of Mm-th-Eng; Black Tai of Lai Ch'ou, Black
Tai of SEn La; Black Tai of Thach L-Eng; Tho of Bc Giang; Tho of Bc Giang; Tho of Co-ky; Tho of Ch-ra; Tho of B'mc C'n; Tho
of Soc Giang; Tho of Don-ny; Tho of Trung Khinh phu; Tho of Cao Bang and Lang SEn; Tho of Cao Bang, Tho of Cao Binh and
Nguy'n Binh; Thai of Y'n Bi, White Tai of Lai Ch'ou, Paris, EFEPO, 1949.
3. **Tay** and **Nung** are two ethnicities under Thai linguistic family, and **Tay** was called **Tho** formerly. It is necessary to see that to the daily conversation of the local people, as one wishes and according to region, they use both:

Kân Thô: Thô people  
Kân Tay: Tay people².

Nowadays in Lang Son, in everyday language of the natives, the **Tay** sometimes is called *can Tho* = people Thô), and someone like to specify them as Tay Thô.

Therefore, in foreign documents, we sometimes see thô³ that is used to define **Tay**.

It is remarkable that since the population survey in 1979, with the appellation determination unifying for 54 ethnicities remain in Vietnamese great family, and in formal documents, the name of Thô has been used to imply a ethnic minority under Viet - Muong group only.

Some authors as F. M. Savina, J. Saul... distinguish the tongue of Tay to the tongue of Nung.

Yên Son named them the Nông to distinguish them from the Nung people in Moncay, who is really the Hoa (Chinese) in the region (see footnote 3, pp. 15-16).

Poet Triệu Ân and be dead national culturalist Hoàng Quyết have ever insisted that: "**The tongue of Tay is phonetically very rich**" ⁴. In the *Introduction* for his doctoral thesis of philology Ph. D. dissertation, Mong Ky Slay confirm clearly that: "**The tongue of Nung is under Thai linguistic family. Within the same origin of the tongue of Nung in Vietnam, there are the ones of Tay, Thai, Bo Y, Giay...**" ⁵.

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At the Institute of Han-Nom Studies, National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, was opened, since May 26, 2000, a class of Nôm Tày - Nùng and the surprise is the presence of twenty young leaners from inside and outside the Institute.
In the natives' cognition, the distinguishing between Tay and Nung often limited only in the phonetic differences (initial consonant, rhyme and tone) expressed through couplet regulations. We had met a married couple who were born far from each other only a river, the husband articulates chin but the wife says kin (= to eat).

There exist also lexical differences but there are few numbers of variations. However, some cases are not considered unified, for example in order to indicate grapefruit, somebody says mac pàng in Tay, mac puc in Nung, someone says on the contrary.

4. Meanwhile, many researchers consider that because of their nearest relationship, it is said that these two ethnicities have a common language - the tongue of Tay - Nung.

The tongue of Tay - Nung has been well acquainted in Vietnam by the researchers for about recent thirty years. It is the alternative habitation and the linguistic closeness cause to an oral integration of the Tay and Nung in the region, especially in the last half of this century.

It is regret that the demotic character Nôm Tay - Nung ¹ isn't popularized though the number of collected documents and texts is remarkable.

In fact, the tongue of Tay - Nung mainly remains in different oral dialects. Many efforts have been spent to the standardization of Tay-Nung tongue to develop latinized characters since 1969 but this set wasn't welcome and integrated into practice. Because of many subjective and objective reasons, some Tay and Nung intellectuals do not accept completely.

In a collective work, Ha Van Thu, a skillful culturalist who lived for a long time beside the Tay, the Nung and a Tay ethnologist, La Van Lo (both were dead), agreed to confirm: “The difference between the tongue of Tay and the tongue of Nung was of only local characteristics” ².

In another collective one, three linguistic researchers of Tay people, among them Prof. Dr. Hoang Van Ma affirmed: “It may say that the Tay and the Nung have a common language” ³.

Luc Van Pao, a Tay researcher who is successful in collecting many precious documents had said: “This book aimed to serve the Tay - Nung people an original in Tay - Nung language” ⁴.

Prof. Dr. Doan Thi Thuat, a phonetician who spent many years to examine and to research this language, noted: ‘The ethnies Tay and Nung speak a common language that is the Tay - Nung tongue. Many linguists classed it to Tay - Thai branch, sino-Thai, sino-tibetan previously but it is classed to austronesian family recently’ ⁵.

Dr. Cung Van Luoc, a specialist in demotic character considered: ‘The Tay, the Nung speak a common language’. He also advised us to identify: ‘Tay includes also all ethnies of the same linguistic family who resided in the north of Vietnam and in Hwanan (China), Myanmar, Thailand, Lao and the East of India. That was the ancient Tay” ⁶.

5. The ethnonymy is of the researches on name-study (or onomasiology, onomatology, onomatics). By their origin, there are calling name and called name by other ethnies, ethnonyme called by scientific researchers (and/or translated into foreign languages) and formal name written in legal document. Those names can be unified in one although they can be very different from each other. Their difference can not only be in phonetico-lexical level but also in stylistic aspect (neuter or disparaging terms). The distinctions can imply temporary characteristics, that means the ethnonyme (includes formal one) is varied when it is used in different timing dates.

⁴ Doàn Thi Thuat - Hệ thống ngữ âm tiếng Tay - Nùng. Tìm hiểu các dân tộc thiểu số ở Việt Nam, 1972. p 71
According to our current determination of ethnic compositions (Tay, Nung, Thai, Tho) have been formal ethnonyms since 1979 for 4 within 53 ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

Therefore, we shouldn’t write in Vietnamese:

* người Tây-Nùng: người Tây-Thai (the Tay-Nung people, the Tay-Thai people)
* dân tộc Tây-Nùng, dân tộc Tây-Thai... (the Tay-Nung nationality, the Tay-Thai nationality)

and should write such as in Vietnamese:

* người Tây, người Nùng, người Thái (the Tay people, the Nung people, the Thai people)

* (các) dân tộc Tây, Nùng ¹ (the Tay, Nung nationalities)

or we can write:

* các dân tộc Tây Nùng Thái (the Tay Nung Thai nationalities, no hyphen) or
* các dân tộc Tây - Thái² (the Tay - Thai nationalities)

while we can write:

* tiếng Tây-Nùng ³ (the Tay-Nung tongue)
* nhóm ngôn ngữ Tây-Thai ⁴ (the Tay-Thai linguistic group),
* các dân tộc nói ngôn ngữ Thái - Tay ⁴ (the Thai-Tay languages speaking nationalities).

Linguistic researches on ethnic minorities languages in general, on Tay-Thai languages in particular should be determined and understood correctly in comparison to acquainted ethnonyms in order to avoid take a hen for a moor hen, as in Vietnamese “husband says chicken, wife says duck”.

The above issued given with the hope that they would be considered suggestions of carefulness in researching the languages of Vietnamese ethnic minorities which include the languages of Tay-Thai linguistic family.

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¹ Tiếng Pa-cojong ngõ nong người Mon-Khmer ưu tiên sử dụng ở vực vùng núi miền Trung Viets Nam, phủ tạo thành phó Huế.